

Trade Unionism

... AND ...

Anarchism

A LETTER TO A BROTHER UNIONIST

— BY —

JAY FOX

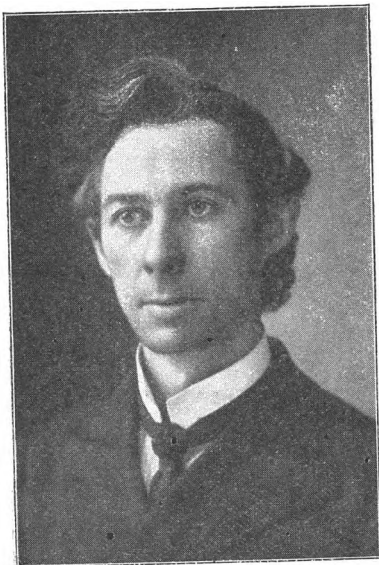


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TRADE UNIONISM AND ANARCHISM

A Letter to a Brother Unionist.

Dear Friend and Brother:

In your letter, just to hand, you ask me if I know what Anarchism has to do with trade unionism. You write that many members of your local union are professed Anarchists; that these men are deeply interested in strengthening the union, that they are active and alert, and are possessed of more than ordinary enthusiasm in furthering the cause of unionism. You seem at a loss to understand this, and ask me if I can give you an explanation of it.

If I were to say that trade unionism and Anarchism are both striving to solve the same problem, it would not be sufficient. You would still want to know how they can be reconciled in their propagandas. So, in order to understand their relation to one another, it is necessary to understand each in its relation to the problem that both are trying to solve. I cannot hope to give you, within the confines of a letter, more than a glimpse at the philosophy of either unionism or Anarchism.

The aim of the union man is to get back in wages as much of the produce of his toil as the strength of his union will enable him to force from the employers. A union man is never satisfied for very long with the amount of wages he receives; he is ever striving to increase his pay and reduce the hours of toil. The union man working eight hours to-day is no more satisfied than his forefathers were, who worked sixteen. In fact, more discontent exists to-day in the ranks of labor than at any period in the history of man.

All this is quite natural. No man is ever quite contented. No sooner is one desire satisfied than another is created, and because of this element in human nature stagnation and decay are impossible, and man will continue to strive for new ideals so long as the human race exists.

Discontent is always an evidence of intelligence, and it is this intelligent discontent that makes men seek for the satisfaction of their wants in various ways. Trade unionism and Anarchism are two of the ways worked out by intellectual discontent for the attainment of their aims.

When a working man's intellect reaches a certain state of development, he begins to ponder these questions: Am I not entitled to a greater share of the produce of my labor than it pleases my employer to give me? Is the difference between him and me so great that he should get so much and I so little, that he becomes a multi-millionaire and I forever remain a pauper, who must bow to his will and obey his every command and be a slave in every respect except in name? Should I not have something to say about the amount of wages I receive and the conditions under which I toil? Why am I and my fellow-workmen at the mercy of a class who can have no sympathy with us and who at the very best can look upon us only in a charitable way as dependants? Why not alter these conditions? Is there no hope of escape from this thralldom, this humiliating and degrading condition that we have inherited from the ignorance and stupidity of the past?

When these thoughts begin crowding themselves upon the worker, he either organizes a union and becomes a union man, or he conceives a state of society in which mankind can live without employers, or governors of any description, and becomes an Anarchist.

Thus you see the same condition of mind and intelligence produce the unionist and the Anarchist, who are

often one and the same person. In striving to better his lot in the present, he is a unionist; in mapping out a condition of freedom and equality for the future, he is an Anarchist.

* * *

The history of trade unionism is a history of martyrdom. The path of progress is strewn with the bones of sturdy, liberty-loving workers, who fought against the tyranny of government and the rich class that maintains it.

The modern trade union has been struggling for two centuries to better the conditions of the men and women who toil. The employers have always viewed the organization of labor with great alarm, and have never failed to use their tool, the government, to suppress the unions. And the government, true to the purpose of its existence—the protection of the rich—has always responded with infamous laws, inflicting the severest punishment upon those who combined to better their condition.

In spite of government the unions flourished. Men were branded with hot irons, had their ears cut off, and were tortured in a variety of ways invented by the minions of law and order, yet they never gave up the fight; by their heroic struggles they have conquered for us the relative liberty in the matter of organizing, that we enjoy to-day.

Such has been the history of unionism in the past, and since the minds of men and the principles and tactics of government change very slowly, labor will have to continue its battle in the same way, striking with the same weapons, and paying with its sweat and blood for every inch of progress towards its emancipation.

The average trade unionist does not look far into the future. He busies himself with getting what he terms “a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work.” He does not know exactly what a fair day’s pay, or a fair day’s work

is. He knows this: That he gets all the wages he can, and works as few hours as possible. But the more abstract question he does not worry about. It is left for the Anarchist to do that.

The Anarchist, reasoning from the abstract principles of equality, says that a fair day's pay, to be fair, must be a price equal to the full value of the labor expended. If I make a dozen chairs in a week, a "fair" week's pay will be the price of a dozen chairs. If I get any less, some one is getting part of the product of my labor without my approval or consent, which means that I am being robbed. If I get the price of a chair more than the dozen, someone else is being robbed, which is equally as unjust. And if I should get the price of two, or a hundred dozen, chairs a week without making even one chair, as the men whom we call employers are getting, I would be a great robber and a powerful enemy of unionism and Anarchism.

There can be no other definition of a fair day's pay, because it would not be fair if I were to get one chair more or one less than the number I produced.

This is a very simple proposition; one that any workman or woman can easily understand; and once it is understood, the union will have a deeper and more definite significance.

The question as to what shall be a fair day's work will be easily solved after we have settled the question of pay. If I work thirty-six hours making a dozen chairs, and I consider six hours too long a work-day, I can reduce my hours to five or four per day without consulting anybody; since nobody is getting part of my labor-product, nobody will have any interest in making me work longer than I want to.

In fine, the Anarchist wants to develop a free society, in which each man will be at liberty to work as an individual, or to co-operate with his neighbors in voluntary groups without any employers, bosses, or rulers of any

kind. In such a manner only can the Rockefellers be eliminated, and labor be freed from the hands of the monopolists.

At present the capitalist who "employs" me keeps at least half of the chairs that I make, consequently he is interested in keeping me in the factory as long as possible. The more chairs I make the more he gets, and the quicker he enriches himself at my expense. This explains why the employers are so much opposed to the reduction of the hours of labor, or an increase in wages. It also explains why the Anarchist is so ardent and enthusiastic a union man. Always having in mind his idea as to what a fair day's pay and a fair day's labor means, he is urged on to battle for its realization. And you, my friend, cannot fail to be touched by the logic, the justice, and the simplicity of this explanation of the labor question.

The Anarchist believes that the unionist will some day come to his view of what the labor question means; he knows that you and I must soon begin asking ourselves, what is going to be the outcome of this movement we are so deeply interested in. And he knows that as we are reasonable men who have learned by the experience of the past, we are going to be guided by this experience in the future, and will be led as surely as he has been, to see the simple, natural truth of Anarchism; and seeing the truth in all its magnificent beauty and sublime simplicity, we will be inspired to struggle for its realization with an ardor and enthusiasm which only the truth can inspire.

The Anarchist is a thorough believer in his fellow-man. But he is not a utopian. Though he has faith in the goodness of man, he is not blind to his many weaknesses. He does not want to plunge mankind into a condition of life for which its nature is not fitted—a charge often repeated by kindly and well-meaning people

who cannot rid themselves of the belief—instilled in them by false early training—that government must exist to restrain the selfishness of man. They forget that a man with the forces of government at his command has the power to indulge his selfishness multiplied a thousand times.

The Anarchist does not deplore the instinct of selfishness. He simply recognizes it, and is guided accordingly. For instance, he knows that as it is selfishness which makes tyrants and oppressors out of good men when they are placed in positions of power and authority over their fellows, it is the same selfish instinct that makes them kind and considerate neighbors when not clothed with such power. The Anarchist is not so foolish as to think that one set of men, because they belong to a different party, or hold different opinions in politics or economics, are any better or worse than another set. He knows that all men are made from the same clay, and that, placed in the same position, they will act in the same way. He knows that selfishness—self-preservation—is the strongest force in man, that it cannot be eliminated, and should not if it could; for such a condition would reduce mankind to mere machines. He insists that selfishness must not be perverted by being placed in positions of authority where it can enslave mankind; and that the way to protect ourselves from selfishness is to strip it of all power, except the power each person possesses within himself.

His experience and observation have taught him this. And he has the scientific knowledge to show him that it cannot be otherwise. He can point to our unions and show us that even in these small offices, filled generally by the very best of men, the officials—if not watched closely—are apt to assume authority that was never given to them, and to regard themselves as made from a clay superior to that of the rank and file.

Is it any wonder, then, that the Anarchist is sceptical

about trusting men with the power of government? He knows it is scientifically wrong to do it. He asks himself the question: Is it necessary to have a government of man over man in a society of equality, where each worker will get the full value of his dozen chairs? And his heart and mind answer, in unison, *No!*

He sees that government is a fraud; that it does not protect life and property, but that on the contrary it *destroys life* and *protects robbery*. Rich men quarrel and their governments compel the poor man to do the fighting, where hundreds and thousands are slaughtered to settle disputes in which they had no concern, except the foolish interest they take in their kings and presidents. *Is that protecting life?* Rich men steal the earth and make the poor man pay tribute for the privilege of living upon it; and the government enforces the claims of the robbers. *Is that protecting property?*

The Anarchist points out to us that in every strike the government takes the side of the employers. Strikers are clubbed, jailed, bull-penned, shot, deported from their homes, kidnapped and carried off to other States upon trumped-up charges of murder and denounced by the President as "undesirable citizens"; in every conceivable manner they are harassed and punished by the government for asserting their rights to a living wage. "Is it not strange, my brother," a friend once wrote to me, "that law and order always mean scabbing, that all the powers of government are always arrayed on the side of the scab and the blood-sucking employer? That the law which is supposed to be for the protection of the weak against the aggression of the strong, is in every instance found to be operating against the weak?"

Governments claim to protect us against foreign foes. The Anarchists say that we have no foreign foes except foreign governments. We have no fear of invasion by the workers of England, Germany, or France. It is the

governments of those countries that always invade other countries. And with the dissolution of government, all invasion would cease, and war, with all its terrible sacrifice of life, labor and property, will be banished forever from the face of the earth.

The Anarchist is convinced, from his study of humanity, that not until men become angels, will government ever be anything else but a tool in the hands of the strong for the oppression and the exploitation of the weak. Therefore that form of organization which will delegate the least amount of power and authority to the individual is the one best suited to the nature of man,—one that will give each member of society the greatest amount of liberty, and consequently enable him to enjoy the greatest happiness; for happiness consists of the liberty to do that which we want to do.

Anarchism, voluntary association—concludes the Anarchist—is the scientific principle of sociology applied to society and the relations of man to man. Do not compel your neighbor to do that which he does not want to do; surely he will some day be in power—in the majority—and will force you to do his bidding. It is better to let each other alone. In matters of mutual interest you will be drawn together by the magic of self-interest. Where you disagree you will be repelled by the same force. This is science. It is simple. But it has cost the human family ages of suffering to find it out. Our ancestors thought the world was flat, and they constructed a false system of astronomy. They likewise thought man was the creature of a deity, and responsible for his acts to god and government, who might punish him with hell-fire or the hempen halter; and, naturally, they formed a false system of society. We have discarded the false system of astronomy; it is now up to us to upset the false system of society, and embrace freedom.

The Anarchist sees in the growth of the trade union

an evidence of the tendency towards the simple, natural, yet scientific state of society he is working for. Man has been robbed and enslaved first by the private ownership of land, and later his robbery was increased by the private ownership of the houses in which he lived, the factories in which he worked, and the tools he used. So the landlord, the banker, and the capitalist rob him by way of rent, interest, and profit.

The trade unions must soon come to the realization that to free their members from exploitation they must take back the land and the tools, by refusing to pay rent to the landlords, and by refusing to allow the capitalist to buy and sell the product of their toil and control their labor.

"How are they going to do it," you ask. I answer by asking you a question, "How are they reducing the hours of labor and increasing their wages to-day?" Not by legislation, nor by arbitration, but by the powerful weapon of direct action—THE STRIKE.

Politicians and preachers, even our employers, advise us to seek at the ballot-box the redress our wrongs demand; and the misguided friends of labor, the Social Democrats, follow in the same track. Only the Anarchists have warned us against the delusion that an institution like the government—which is organized to protect the interests of the employers—could, by some magic, be transformed into an enemy of its maker and a friend of its victim—*labor*.

Nothing seems more absurd and ridiculous than that the employers would advise us—their victims and slaves—as to the way to free ourselves. Yet foolish as it is, we have really thought the time of legislation at hand; and many as have been our disappointments, we are not all convinced yet that the Anarchists are right.

Speaking for myself, I have been stripped of the delusion long ago. Practical experience has torn the veil

from my eyes. I have seen too many failures in the attempt to get better conditions through the medium of the law.

The limits of a letter forbid my mentioning more than one or two. But if you wish to pursue this subject further, you will find a long and sad record of labor laws dead and buried in the courts.

The unions of New York had a law passed making ten hours a legal day's work for bakers. Surely that was not unreasonable when other workers were working as low as four hours a day. Yet the Supreme Court declared the law unconstitutional. Why does not that learned court declare the four-hour day of the Jewish linotype printers unconstitutional? There is a very good reason: it has no jurisdiction. The printers made their own four-hour law, and put it into effect by the force of the strike. The printers are working four hours. The bakers followed the advice of the employers. They appealed to the State. They used the ballot. They went on their knees before the law-makers with the modest request for a ten-hour day. The law was passed. The Supreme Court scratched it off the book. The bakers are working eleven, twelve, and thirteen hours a day.

Another example. The people of the State of Colorado, in the exercise of their sovereign power, declared at the ballot box that a law should be passed making eight hours a legal day's work in and about the mines of the State. The law-makers ignored the will of the people and refused to make the law. Seeing themselves and the majority of their fellow-citizens thus baffled by the politicians, the miners' union fell back upon its old methods of direct action, and refused to work. The miners struck to enforce the will of the people as expressed at the ballot box. What did the "servants" of the people do? Did the Governor of Colorado put every gun at his command—with a man behind it—at the service of the people?

No! But he put every soldier of the State at the service of the mine owners. These bloodhounds of the rich fell upon the miners, murdered them, drove them from the State, locked them up in bull pens, and committed every conceivable crime against justice.

This is how the government serves the people. It murders them at the behest of the capitalists. The Anarchists say this is inevitable; that despite all hypocritical cant about government by and for the people, government is, as it always has been, the obedient servant of the rich.

Your own observation ought to convince you of the truth of this assertion, without any further efforts on my part. In the face of all the facts of recent history, how there are still workingmen who hope for relief from their miserable condition through the ballot, is quite beyond my comprehension. I am glad to note, however, that the more advanced and thoughtful workers are giving up the ballot, and turning to their unions with renewed energy and hope.

The Japanese Socialists have abandoned political action for direct action and the GENERAL STRIKE. The trade unions of France have declared for the General Strike as the best weapon of the people in their battle for liberty. The General Strike is being advocated in every country to-day. This, again, the Anarchist says is inevitable, because it is an inseparable part of the labor movement and must extend as the unions extend; and so sure as unionism becomes universal, so must the strike become universal. We have seen the labor unions grow year by year, and so have we seen the strike become more extended, and it only requires time and experience to develop the desire for a GENERAL STRIKE.

Conditions will force us, eventually, to abandon the old methods for the General Strike, say the Anarchists; the future of labor lies in the unions. The General Strike

will surely be the weapon of the future. It is the evolutionary method. It is the non-invasive method. It forces no man; it avoids him; it lets him alone. It says to the employer: "These workers have labored for you for ages, with misery as their only reward. Your priests and politicians have taught them from the cradle that all the products of their toil belonged to you, except the miserable wage they were impressed they should be grateful for. They were taught that the highest and noblest virtue man can possess is respect for your property-rights in the fruit of their toil, and obedience and submission to the laws made by your agents for the perpetuation of this system of spoils and graft. But these laborers have at last hearkened to the voice of reason. They have ceased to supplicate the skies. They have turned their eyes towards the earth, and they see that your assumed ownership of the land and of the wealth you did not create, is not only wrong, but it is robbery, and that you are a plain thief, usurper and parasite. They will no longer produce wealth for you, while ragged and hungry themselves; no longer respect your unjust title to the Earth, and themselves go without a home. Henceforth wealth belongs to him who produces it, and the Earth belongs to all. This is the rallying cry of the workers, awakened; and I, THE GENERAL STRIKE, AM THEIR REDEEMER."

Respectfully, your friend and fellow-worker,

JAY FOX.

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